

May 2011



# better beginnings

EVERY CHILD DESERVES OUR BEST

UAMS

CHILD CARE PROVIDER SURVEY REPORT

## Executive Summary

All child care providers in the state of Arkansas were invited to participate in an online survey about their experiences or expectations about Better Beginnings. We used website, U.S. mail, and email to invite providers throughout the state to participate in the online survey. The invitation was posted on the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) website. DCCECE also provided contact information for 3,047 licensed child care providers. Providers with valid email addresses were emailed an invitation and a reminder of the survey deadline. Providers without valid email addresses (n=1, 472) were mailed a postcard. Of those, 36 postcards were undeliverable. One hundred fifty-seven sites were registered for multiple licenses. These sites were also mailed an additional follow-up letter explaining how to fill out a single survey for multiple licenses. All communications included information about the monetary incentive to participate: a drawing for two \$200 prizes and four \$100 prizes.

### Sample Characteristics

*Better Beginnings Participating Providers.* With 262 respondents, an overall 38% response rate was achieved for participating providers. The majority of respondents were mostly at the highest level of quality (Level 3, n=216, 82%) and were providers of center-based child care (n=213).

*Better Beginnings Non-Participants.* There were 254 non-participating respondents to the survey (an 11% overall response rate). Characteristics of the providers suggest that respondents were likely to be of higher than average quality. For preschoolers, approximately 60% of all of the respondents reported having ratios that were better than required by the state, and most of the respondents (n=176, 69%) reported using at least one curriculum.

### Concerns about Participating

We asked only non-participating providers about concerns that could keep them from participating in Better Beginnings. Areas where providers have concerns were 1) training time for program staff, 2) costs associated with meeting requirements, 3) time for administrative tasks, and 4) time to complete application process. Open-ended responses about difficulties were related to Better Beginnings not working for part-time centers, quality not representing real quality for children, and associated costs.

### Concerns about Better Beginnings Components

We asked participating providers about their difficulties with attaining and documenting Better Beginnings components. For both sets of questions, the administrative sections of Better Beginnings—the Program Administration Scale (PAS)/Business Administration Scale (BAS) and Strengthening Families—were the areas where respondents reported the greatest concern. We asked respondents to explain their concerns for each of the items, and the majority of stated concerns about the PAS/BAS were related the time burdens of documenting standards. For the Strengthening Families component, most of the concerns were related to an inability to access and/or understand the training and materials.

Similarly, when we asked non-participating providers about their difficulties with attaining Better Beginnings components, respondents believed that the administration section would be difficult for them to attain. Like participating respondents, the majority of concerns for PAS/BAS were related to time constraints; many comments were specific to documentation requirements. For Strengthening Families, time constraints were listed as a main concern, as well as uncertainty of requirements. Additional concerns focused on difficulty interacting with families and technology concerns. Unlike the participating

respondents, non-participants also expressed concerns about the environmental rating where general and staff-related anxiety and costs for materials/equipment were the primary concerns.

#### Costs of Participation

We asked both participating and non-participating providers about costs of participating in Better Beginnings and for which components the costs were associated. The majority of respondents in both groups reported costs associated with 1) the environmental assessment – the majority of associated costs were materials/equipment for the classroom/school and 2) professional development requirements for staff – costs include paying for training and related travel, covering substitutes in the classroom when teachers are out, and increasing salary costs.

Differences between the groups were seen as participating providers also reflected on costs related to the PAS/BAS assessment. Comments included expenses related to buying supplies/equipment to do documentation (software for budgeting, for example) and personnel costs related to documentation (such as reallocating staff, paying overtime, etc.). Another difference between the groups was evidenced as non-participating providers commented on concerns related to passing on costs to parents and increasing the cost of their care.

#### Better Beginnings' Levels and Planning

*Better Beginnings Levels 1 and 2.* There were a total of 30 programs at lower levels of Better Beginnings (Level 1=19, Level 2=11). We asked them if they planned to apply for a higher level and 97% reported that they would. Eighty-six percent reported they would apply before they were required to renew. We asked if they need additional supports to meet a higher level; the majority reported that they would need additional funding, technical assistance, greater training availability, and support specific to PAS/BAS assessment.

*Better Beginnings Level 3.* Eighty-three percent of Level 3 providers reported they would apply for a higher level. We asked about specific supports needed to maintain Level 3; the majority reported needing support with documentation in general and specific to PAS/BAS. Like Levels 1 and 2, additional supports requested were greater training availability, technical assistance, and funding. Level 3 providers also suggested additional TAPP support and/or improvements to the TAPP registry, and support related to Strengthening Families.

*Non-Participating Providers.* We asked providers if there were any supports that were needed to apply to Better Beginnings. Like those providers who are already participating, the non-participants requested greater number of trainings available and in more areas in the state, technical assistance (help with the application process, curricula, portfolios, and additional trainings with unfamiliar elements such as with portfolios and medical care plans), funding for equipment/materials, hiring/paying more qualified staff, and time for documentation. Finally, there were multiple requests for simplification with comments suggesting that the demand was too high to participate.

#### Changes as a Result of Better Beginnings

We asked participating providers if they had observed changes as a result of participating in Better Beginnings. Seventy-six percent of respondents reported that staff members have a better understanding of the components of a quality program. Only 33% reported that parents have a better understanding of

the components of a quality program, and only 8% agreed that the level was important to parents in choosing their child's care. Fifty-eight percent of respondents had used their rating to promote their center.

### Suggestions for Improvement

We asked both participating and non-participating providers to share with us what changes they would make to the Better Beginnings system. Both groups of providers suggested the need to **simplify** (*"The amount of preparation for the PAS evaluation seems outrageously detailed..."*). Areas of overlap between the two groups included:

- Simplify (*"...Would rather not participate because of ... paperwork..."*)
- Greater training availability including amount and variability in timing and location
- More funding (*"The program needs to provide better financial incentives... The professional development money is not really useful when all of your employees have degrees."*)
- TAPP improvements (*"...Accept out of state and Head Start trainings"*)
- Change Better Beginnings components (*"...Although PAS is important in running a successful business and having systems in place for a quality center, I don't feel that it determines a quality learning environment..."*)
- Provide adjustments/allowances by program type, for instance for part-time programs, family childcare providers, and centers serving children with developmental delays
- Greater clarity and support in applying (*"More hands on support [visits/examples/suggestions/to-do lists/etc.] from a higher level mentor!"*)
- Improve systems alignment (*"To make it more compatible with the ABC regs..."*; *"Head Start...have federal reviews"*)

Participating providers also requested increased and/or timely communication with Better Beginnings, and non-participating providers expressed some uncertainty in the benefit of applying.

## **Recommendations**

### Training

Given recent communication with DCECE, some of the difficulties and suggestions for improvement that providers have reported around training have already been addressed. For example, professional development grants in Better Beginnings can now be used to help cover the costs associated with trainings for the entire staff and not just those attaining CDA or other college-level courses. While this is a welcome change on the part of providers, it's important to balance provider need with what we know about effective professional development: college preparation is the ultimate goal and most likely related to optimal outcomes for children.

Another repeated comment is that there are multiple barriers that limit providers' access to information and opportunities to meet the training hour requirements of Better Beginnings. The state is moving toward providing more training online, which will address some of the issues inherent in state-wide distribution of information and will allow more flexibility in the timing of training. Again, while these changes are likely to improve the accessibility of trainings across the state, the existing literature suggests that trainings that are longer term and customized to the recipient are more successful. Therefore, it may

be necessary to add in some additional technical assistance support around trainings that do not meet the criteria established in the research literature.

#### Administrative Functioning

There were multiple concerns from both participating and non-participating providers about administrative elements of Better Beginnings. The majority of provider concerns were related to the amount of time required to document administrative practices for the PAS/BAS assessment. There were also concerns about the Strengthening Families component of the administrative process review, in this case mostly related to uncertainty in the requirements.

*Program and Business Administration Scales.* The PAS and the BAS are reliable, valid instruments useful in highlighting strengths and weaknesses of business functions. The items most related to child outcomes have been removed from Better Beginnings scoring because they are too far beyond the norm of common practice in Arkansas. However, providers still report PAS/BAS to be overly burdensome, and business practices have not been related to child outcomes in the literature. Therefore, we recommend investigating the replacement of full PAS/BAS assessments with assessment of fewer key elements of business practices, as has been the choice of other QRIS states. We encourage continued use of PAS/BAS as a training and technical assistance tool.

*Strengthening Families.* We would expect use of the Strengthening Families model to heighten awareness and to improve relational helping skills if all staff members, not just administrators, receive more intensive training than currently designated. Most of the provider concern was related to a lack of understanding about what the component entails. Therefore, more education for this component may waylay concerns. However, if providers continue to refuse participation because of the Strengthening Families requirements, it is an area to further consider revision. As currently implemented, Strengthening Families is less likely to lead to major benefits for children. Reducing the burden to providers while retaining the assessments of the elements of care that most strongly benefit children (such as the ERS) is recommended.

#### Adaptations by Program Type

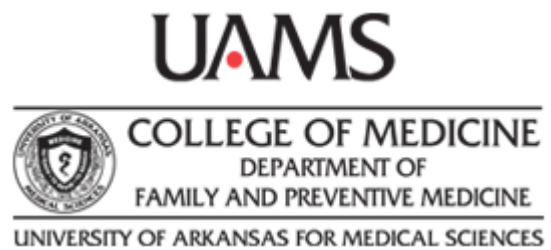
There were multiple comments related to making adjustments for certain types of programs. Comments ranged from difficulties of part-time and family care programs in meeting requirements, to better alignment of state systems (such as with Arkansas Better Chance programs), and to reciprocity for some programs that have federal reviews (such as Head Start). UAMS is currently conducting interviews with providers across the state to better understand the needs of programs of different types and will report to DCCECE by the summer of 2011. We also know that the state is currently realigning the regulations of ABC to better match Better Beginnings, which will alleviate some provider concern for duplicity of documentation. While we do not see immediate reciprocity to Head Start programs being granted, the review of performance standards conducted as part of the first-year evaluation of Better Beginnings highlighted vast areas of overlap where additional documentation for rating could be waived given the current Better Beginnings system.

*Head Start Programs.* As a whole, Head Start programs are required by federal regulations to meet many of the standards in Better Beginnings. Documenting that programs are in good standing as a result of federal review, verifying that CLASS scores meet the cut off as shown to positively relate to child outcomes (a minimum score of 3.25), and limiting the additional assessments required for Better

Beginnings would be an appropriate cost-saving measure for the state and has the potential to increase participation among Head Start programs.

Summary

The Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education is devoted to creating a voluntary Quality Improvement initiative that will benefit Arkansas children and their families. DCCECE has already made changes to the implementation of its professional development grants to make them more useful to providers. Future changes to Better Beginnings should thoughtfully balance the needs of providers willing to make program improvements with elements of care linked to children's health and development in research.



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